

Post welcomes back 63rd Engineers
By Vince Little / The Bayonet

About 90 Soldiers from the 63rd Engineer Company are back on familiar turf after spending almost 15 months in Iraq.

Family and friends packed Freedom Hall in the wee hours Monday morning as the group's plane touched down at Lawson Army Airfield. A second wave of about 60 troops from the unit is expected to arrive this weekend.

This marked the company's third deployment for Operation Iraqi Freedom. The last was from November 2005 to November 2006.

MG Michael Ferriter, the U.S. Army Infantry Center and Fort Benning commanding general, greeted the Soldiers as they stepped off the plane. The welcome also included LTC Dwayne Smith, the 11th Engineer Battalion commander.

"They did a great job, an amazing job," Smith said. "Thankfully, no one was hurt, either ... We're just glad to have these folks home."

The 63rd Engineers served as a combat support equipment unit that worked on base camp improvements, built roads and airfields, maintained communication lines and helped patrols clear routes of roadside bombs.

Their loved ones began gathering between 2 and 3 a.m. at Freedom Hall for the homecoming.

Nancy Price said she drove an hour from LaGrange, Ga., and had been up about 24 hours to pick up her husband, SGT Carl Price. The couple's three boys — ages 4, 3 and 2 — stayed home with a baby sitter.

"I'm tired," she said, "but you get a second wind. It's kicking in. I'm very excited.

"The kids have no idea he's coming home. I want to surprise them. We did the same thing during his leave ... They knew he was at work in the desert. This time, I can tell them he doesn't have to go back to work again."

Sparkle Sawyer, who brought 8-year-old daughter Arielle and 2-year-old son Cash, said she couldn't wait to get a glimpse of her husband, SGT Milton Sawyer. The children got some sleep earlier but Sawyer said she was awake all night.

"There's a little bit of nervousness and a lot of excitement," Sawyer said. "It's emotional, too. As soon as I see his face, it might bring a tear.

"(The separation) is a lot harder than you can really imagine ... It's been tough, but it's over with now."

Just after 4 a.m., families and friends erupted in cheers as the Soldiers entered the terminal in formation and marched past "Welcome Home" banners before coming to a halt under a large American flag.

After an invocation and singing of the national anthem, Smith put the company "at ease" and told the crowd, "Families, come get your Soldier."

"It's outstanding, man," said SSG Charles Miller, with both arms wrapped around his wife, Eva. "You can't beat coming home."

The 63rd Engineers will get about a month of leave before resuming normal duties, Smith said.

Eva Miller said they'd soon take a trip to Disney World in Florida, and then head over to Tampa and St. Petersburg to see their family.

Her husband reflected on his fourth deployment overall and third to Iraq.

"This one was a little more safe," Miller said, adding he likely has at least one more trip to go with four years left until retirement. "As long as we keep up with the changes over there, I think we'll be all right."

SPC Charles Richards, home after a third Iraq deployment, soaked up hugs with his two daughters, Savannah and Madison.

"This is great," he said. "(The deployment) was long. The last one was 12 months and the first was six months. I'm just glad to be back."

His mother-in-law, Cathie Littlefield, drove from Dallas, Ga., about an hour northwest of Atlanta, to join the reunion. "I'm making a big pot of spaghetti for him tonight," she said.

Richards also has plans to visit his parents in Illinois, he said.

Coming back around the July Fourth holiday makes the homecoming even more special for the 63rd Engineers, Charles Miller said.

"Independence Day means a lot to our own freedom," he said. "Now, we're free again to be with our family and friends."



(SSG Charles Miller of the 63rd Engineer Company hugs his wife, Eva, early Monday after returning from a 15-month deployment to Iraq)